

Anna Propos

To the Daring Belongs the
Future: The
Anarcha-Feminist
Movement

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The anarchist movement has long fostered feminists for several quite obvious reasons. Primarily, the concepts and basic ideologies of anarchism are very similar to those of feminists, because the society that the anarchists are looking to overthrow is largely based on male supremacy. For this reason, during the height of anarchism, many feminists hailed to early anarchists as their influences. However, many mainstream male anarchists rejected them, employing the typical views of the time that women were meant to care for domestic affairs. For this reason many anarchist women identified themselves with the feminist movement rather than be associated with anarchist men.

Women anarchists mainly focused their attention on the traditional family structure. They saw sexual inequality in the nuclear family, and believed that reform of laws alone could not bring about equality, and therefore mainly fought for the anarcho-communist cause. Most women supported communist anarchists, because they believed that a less regulated social structure helped to serve the needs of the anarcho-feminist. If all were equal in their ideal community, then women would not be suppressed.

Another cause that the anarcho-feminists fought for was the issue of birth control. Since the main concerns of anarchists in America were sexual, it was mainly American anarchists who promoted contraception. In Europe the issue was less hotly debated because most countries had more sexual freedom than America. In the early twentieth century, it was argued that frequent childbirth weakened women and produced sickly children. Later on, with the rising demand for sexual freedom, women further argued that they could not be free if they were not secure in knowing that they had a means to prevent pregnancy. Goldman argued that for many women sexual attraction was the only color in their life, and should not be forced to suppress their sexuality, nor to suffer an abortion or unwed motherhood.

Feminists such as Emma Goldman and Voltairine de Cleyre fought for women's rights, yet strongly opposed suffrage. De Cleyre argued, "the ballot hasn't made man free and it won't make us free." Goldman, like de Clayre denounced the fight for woman suffrage, and she even went so far as to call it evil. Goldman argued that the ballot gave people the illusion that they had power, and enslaved them to the government. She also contested that people easily submitted if they believed that they did it by choice (Marsh 60–61).

Most anarchist women fought for the rights of homosexuals as well as heterosexual women. Although many women supported homosexuals, Emma Goldman was the most involved with lesbians in the anarchist movement. Her most notable acquaintance was Margaret Anderson, a Chicago bohemian who was eventually drawn to the anarchist movement by her admiration for Goldman. She suggested that homosexuality might be more natural than heterosexual relationships. Goldman encouraged Anderson's belief that sexual liberation and self-realization were identical. Anderson's admiration for Goldman soon faded as she began to see Goldman's weaknesses. As Anderson began to realize the error in her earlier beliefs, she drifted away from the anarchist movement (Marsh 41–42, 94).

It was also speculated that Goldman had a lesbian relationship with a political activist and former prostitute, Almeda Sperry. Although Sperry wrote love letters to Goldman, there is no way of proving that Goldman had any sexual relation with the younger woman. In fact, Goldman seemed to have difficulty with female friends. She viewed them as political and sexual rivalries. While

she praised many women activists, she found personal relationships difficult (Morton 68).

Many early anarchists such as Pierre-Joseph Proudhon applied their doctrines of equality only to European males. He declared that there are “badly born and bastard races” (Marshal 256). Another anarchist, Peter Kropotkin, expected women to be politically active, but at the same time disapproved of women who put feminism above their faithfulness and their devotion to working class males (Marsh19).

Although a few men completely denounced women as their inferiors, most men simply ignored the women anarchists. Many male anarchists, both communist-anarchists and individualists believed that women would achieve sexual freedom after a revolution. These men urged women to put aside their fight for equality and aid the men in their fight to overthrow hierarchy. These men, such as Peter Kropotkin and Victor Yarros insisted that a fight for the workers would pave the way for the women’s liberation movement (Marsh 54).

The rights that women anarchists fought for were basically the same as mainstream anarchists, yet the anarcha-feminists actually practiced what the common male anarchist preached. While the male anarchist argued for freedom and equality, his household was a classic nuclear family structure. The female anarchists, however, worked towards sexual freedom, and did practice to the extent that they could, for many men suppressed their rights for birth control.

Even with their radical ideas, many male anarchists were very conventional, not only in beliefs, but within their own families as well. These men let themselves be influenced by the common prejudices of a society larger than their own small anarchist community. This was a violation of the morals that held their together their system of beliefs. Although they fought for absolute equality, they practiced selectively on groups they saw fit to liberate.

Among the male anarchists there were a few supporters of the feminist movement. Michael Bakunin declared that: “We demand, along with freedom, equal rights and duties for men and women” (Burman 200). Hugh Pentecost believed that women were intellectually inferior to men, but this was simply a result of their lack of freedom. One British libertarian socialist, Edward Carpenter demanded a world where “...men and women could be lovers and friends” (Marshal169). Another anarchist man, and perhaps the most influential male feminist, published his journal *Lucifer*, and dedicated it to the “emancipation of women from sex slavery. “However, because of his support for the women’s rights movement, neither Herman nor *Lucifer* were taken seriously by other anarchist men (Marsh 55–56).

Many anarchist men who supported the women in their struggles were government-by-consent anarchists. These men, such as S. P. Andrews and Josiah Warren, promised women they would “relieve the female from of the family from the full, mill-horse drudgery...” (DeLeon 78).

Many anarcha-feminists found little more luck with the main stream feminists than they did with male anarchists. The common feminist cared little about the economy and government and disregarded the anarchist women. To the anarchist women, this was ridiculous. They saw the state and patriarchy as one, and presented this as further evidence in favor of destroying all male-dominated power structures.

One factor that divided the women of two separate movements was the separation of classes. Of a sample of ten women from each group, fifty percent of

anarchists were of the lower class, while seventy percent of mainstream feminists were middle class, and thirty percent were upper class (Marsh178). This meant that the feminists were simply fighting for a right in a society that could work for them, while anarcha-feminists wanted a part of a world that did not yet exist.

Anarcha-feminist found themselves rejected by two worlds in which they should have been welcomed. Most male anarchists viewed the struggle for equal rights as a waste of time. They valued their fight against government more than the idea that equal rights created a stronger community. Mainstream feminists saw the anarchists as ideologists, mainly because the major advocates of suffrage were socially privileged and had no problem with the system they lived in. If given equal rights, the feminist felt they could live in their society. Because of this discouragement from groups on both sides, the anarcha-feminists made little progress, yet did influence a later generation of women anarchists in the 1960's. So, the anarcha-feminist work was not in vain, although their cause must have seemed hopeless in a time when only two or three of their numbers were widely known for their struggle against a state made of hierarchy, corruption, and patriarchy.

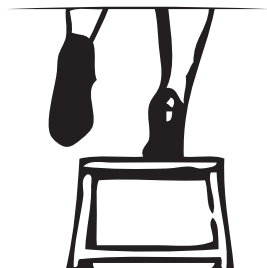
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